BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY

Bridgewater Review

Volume 16 | Issue 2 Article 12

Dec-1997

Cultural Commentary: Americans in Paris

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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Americans in Paris

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Ben Franklin loved Paris for its intellectual excitement and sophistication. Thomas Jefferson admired the city's architecture, painting and music, but was shocked by the Parisians' sexual behavior. Mark Twain, a century later, found Paris "enchanting." Henry James liked the sense of freedom, the fact that "here one can arrange one's life exactly as one pleases." For Ernest Hemingway, Paris was "a movable feast" and a city where you could live well no matter how poor you were. For two centuries, Americans have been discovering that Paris is charming, stimulating, liberating, shocking — very different from home.

I first visited Paris as a college student in the 1960's, with many of these ideas and associations in mind. My friend and I found a hotel in the Latin Quarter which featured a long climb up creaky stairs and lights that always switched off just before we had reached our floor. The beds were small and lumpy, with leaden jellyrolls in place of pillows. We didn't know what the bidet was, but found it handy for washing our drip-dry clothes. The toilet was down the hall, and the hotel had only one bathtub, which had to be reserved a few days in advance and, of course, cost extra. All of this we found charming. Baguettes and croissants were then a delicious novelty, unknown in the U.S., and French cheeses were a revelation to girls who had been raised on Velveeta. We always carried the popular 1960's student guidebook, *Europe on Five Dollars A Day*, which then represented an achievable goal.

Our expectations of Paris were colored by its legendary association with art, sophistication and romance. We had studied Paris in the 1920's, when writers like Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and James Joyce, attracted by the atmosphere of freedom and artistic excitement, abandoned their English-speaking homelands. At the same time, leading European painters and composers such as Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso and Stravinsky came to live in Paris. Gertrude Stein, an American expatriate whose Paris apartment became a meeting place for artists and writers, explained rather condescendingly that Americans "came to Paris a great many of them to paint pictures and naturally they could not do that at home, or write...they could be dentists at home." Nor could their writings be published at home: during the 1920's, English-language magazines in Paris published experimental fiction which was banned in England and the U.S. on the grounds of obscenity. Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, published in Paris in 1922, could not appear in print in the U. S. until 1934. Novels by Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence, banned in the U.S. until the 1960's, were also printed in Paris. In fact, a few years before our trip, college friends travelling abroad had smuggled copies of *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* past U.S. Customs in plain brown wrappers.

American films of the 1950's helped to form our idea of Paris. *An American in Paris* (1951) starred Gene Kelly as an aspiring painter who lives in a garret (which fortunately has a splendid view over the rooftops of the city), drinks wine in picturesque cafes, displays his paintings in the streets of Montmartre — and falls in love. Several years later, *Gigi* (1958) evoked a different milieu, that of Belle Epoque Paris. Instead of starving artists, the characters in *Gigi* are aristocrats who wear elegant clothes, drink champagne, dine at Maxim's, ride through the Bois de Boulogne — and fall in love. As recent a film as Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) playfully adapts this tradition. The Julia Roberts character finds Woody's romantic Paris apartment, which appears to be situated across the street from the Sacre Coeur Basilica, a fulfillment of her dream fantasy. In the closing scene of the film, Allen and Goldie Hawn dance Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers-style along the banks of the Seine — the busy modern highway above hidden from view.

But, for today's tourists, the busy modern highway is a significant presence and the real Paris is far removed from the Paris of legend. I have returned several times over the past 30 years, most recently during the summer of 1997, and with each visit the artistic and romantic Paris seems less evident and the modern one more so. Congested roads, high-rise office buildings, crowded sidewalks — today's Paris is a lot like every other big, modern city. Last fall, for the first time, air pollution levels got so dangerously high that authorities were forced to order half the cars — those with even-numbered plates — off the road for a day and to recommend that children and elderly people stay indoors.

Visiting Paris in the 1990's means being in the company of millions of other people who are also visiting Paris. The population of France doubles during the tourist season; which explains why almost everybody seems to be carrying a map and a camera. Swarms of tourists descend daily from tour buses to see and photograph Notre Dame Cathedral and the Chateau of Versailles. They mingle with thousands of young people equipped with backpacks and water bottles and having the slightly unkempt look that suggests nights spent in youth hostels.

Paradoxically, just as more Americans are visiting and living in Paris than ever before, Paris itself has become more like America. Early predictions that the sophisticated French would scorn the "Big Mac" proved to be wrong, and MacDonald's and other American-style fast-food stores are a well-established feature of the landscape.

On the outskirts of Paris, Eurodisney, after a shaky start, is apparently as successful as its American parent parks; presumably the employees have learned to smile and say "Av a nice day." The elegant Trianon Palace Hotel, where the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I was signed, is now part of the Westin chain, and Westins and Marriotts have proliferated, replacing many of the small hotels. "Buvez Coca-cola" signs are ubiquitous, as are waiters clad in "Coca-cola" and "Lipton's Fun Tea" shirts. Several spacious Haagen Dazs Ice Cream shops have opened in Paris, and appear to be doing well. Backwards baseball caps and baggy pants are as common as on the streets of Boston.

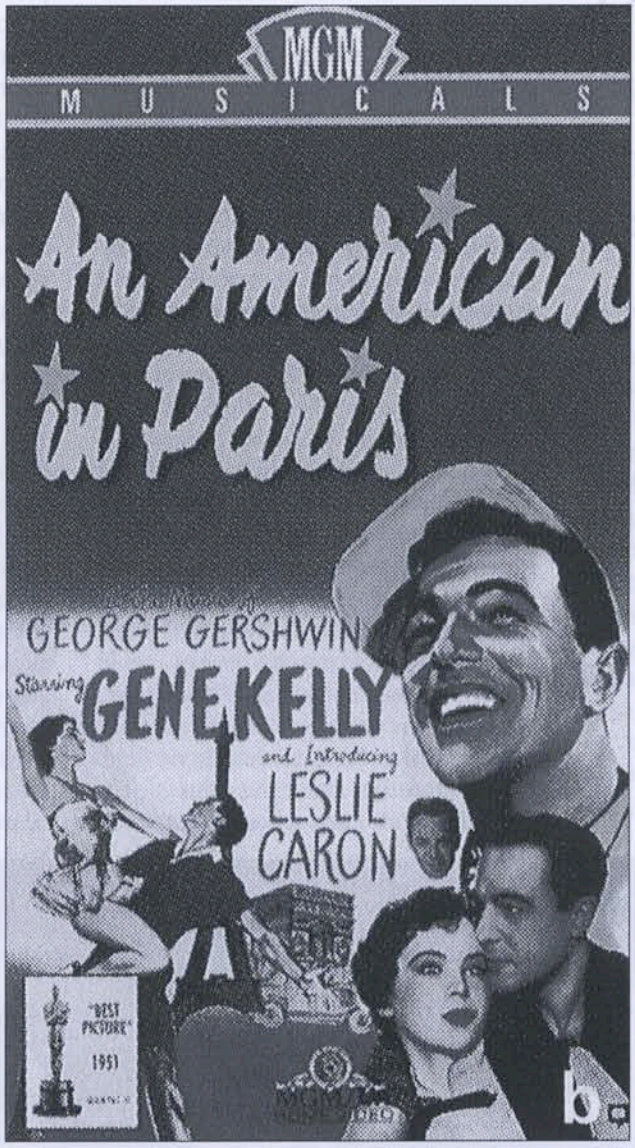
Yet beneath the surface of Americanization, significant aspects of the French way of life remain constant. Public spaces are kept clean and attractive and decorated with fresh flowers. Each morning, legions of street cleaners dressed in bright green uniforms wield fluorescent green brooms through the streets of Paris, followed by large trucks with high-pressure hoses. As a result, the streets are virtually free of litter, empty beer bottles and food wrappers. Historic buildings and monuments are periodically scrubbed and even private landlords are obliged by law to clean their facades every twenty years.

French character is also a constant. Americans notice the Parisians' independent streak, displayed most publically in their dedication to automotive rights and their parking behavior. Any unoccupied space, whether in the street or on the sidewalk, is considered to be a legitimate parking spot.

"Is this legal?" I once asked, as a French friend eased his Renault over the curb and onto the sidewalk and deftly squeezed it between two other cars.

"Legal?" His shrug indicated that the word itself was problematic. "You buy a car, you pay taxes to the state, you pay for a license — therefore you are entitled to a parking space."

His logic seemed irrefutable, perhaps the kind of thinking Charles de Gaulle had in mind when he made his famous remark about the impossibility of governing a country that produces two hundred forty-six kinds of cheese.



The lowest point of my most recent visit to Paris came when my wallet was stolen in the metro. It was a classic dumb-tourist scenario: I had bought my ticket and turned to put the wallet back in my bag when some English-speaking tourists asked for directions. We consulted the map, discussed the best route — and when I finally looked down into my still-open bag, the wallet was gone. Fortunately, I had been carrying only a small amount of cash, but the wallet did contain credit cards and items (driver's license, Bridgewater I. D.) which, although useless to the thief, would be tedious and time-consuming to replace.

At the local Prefecture, the police officer who filled out the crime report ("Vol D'un Porte-monnaie Dans Le Sac A Main" — theft of a wallet in a handbag) advised me that there were a great many pick-pockets in Paris and that large numbers of them hung around metro stations on the lookout for confused tourists like me. I related the details of the crime, signed the report, and assumed that was the end of it.

But — surprise! The next day my phone rang. The janitor of an apartment building had seen my wallet in the trash, picked it up, found a Parisian friend's phone number in it and called. The cash was gone, of course, but everything else, including the credit cards, was untouched. When I related this story, which seemed to me, as a Bostonian and former New Yorker, rather amazing, my Parisian friends were not surprised. To them it seemed quite "normal" that the wallet had been returned: "This often happens."

The legendary Paris — free, artistic, romantic, sophisticated — may have all but disappeared, but the city is still, if you look carefully, different from home.